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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an inner-city youth project designed by a community mental health center serving the greater Rochester, New York area. The counseling strategy used in the project, an integration of photography with group discussion, values clarification, art, and creative writing, is designed to: (1) help children gain self-confidence through the mastery of basic photographic skills and practice in written and visual communication: (2) provide an environment conducive to the sharing of feelings whose expression may be unacceptable in other settings; (3) foster trusting, honest relationships among group participants; (4) provide feedback to the children about how others view them; and (5) offer options for behavioral change. The referral system through which the youths were identified and the counseling groups set up is described. The components of the group meetings, i.e., photography or written exercise, discussion, and play, are placed within a philosophical framework emphasizing the importance of creative activity and group discussion in helping children to structure, focus, and work through their feelings. (Author/CS)

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CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY AND SELF EXPRESSION

Groups at Nineteenth Ward Youth Project

Presented By: Bruce Horowitz, Senior Youth Worker
19th Ward Youth Project
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at

American Psychological Association
"Group Psychotherapy with Children:
Summing-up the Seventies --
Exploring the Eighties"

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Group Psychotherapy with Children:

Summing-up the Seventies -- Exploring the Eighties

Creative Photography and Self Expression Groups at the Nineteenth Ward Youth Project

The Nineteenth Ward Youth Project originated in 1968 out of the Community Association's desire to deal with problems and needs of youth in the Nineteenth, Third, and Eleventh Wards of Rochester, New York. The Youth Project consisted of two drop-in centers for teens and a media workshop for youth of all ages.

The programs were constructed as follows: The drop-in centers served as social and recreational resources to neighborhood youth but the main focus of the centers was their counseling-educational component. Youth workers, volunteers, and mental health consultants provided a variety of direct services including discussion groups, individual counseling, and crisis intervention. The media program consisted of film and still photography workshops for teens and youth. The purpose of this program was to expose children to the creative possibilities and pleasures of film and photography.

By the early 1970's the previously described programs began shifting priorities. The shift in philosophy was accompanied by a demonstration grant from the National Institute of Mental Health that was awarded to the Nineteenth Ward Community Association. The grant was to provide funding for primary and secondary mental health services for children, and youth in our target area. Thus, while the program originated as a counseling,

recreation, and arts program aimed at teens and juvenile delinquency treatment, we evolved into a community mental health center. Our main objectives became the identification and treatment of children experiencing developmental crises but not necessarily having diagnosable problems. We expanded our target population to include the needs of elementary school-age children. In 1977 the Youth Project merged with Convalescent Hospital for Children, a community mental health center serving the greater Rochester area and Monroe County. The Youth Project became a satellite clinic for the Hospital serving an inner city population. A clinical component including a social worker, psychologist, and part-time psychiatrist has been added since then.

As the Youth Project began refining its primary and secondary preventative services, the photography workshop expanded its role accordingly by creating photography and self-expression groups. While it is my belief that a human being's involvement with any creative process is in and of itself a mentally healthy activity, I felt photography integrated with group discussions, values clarification, art, and creative writing could have a more profound and personal impact on children. Our goals for children in these groups were as follows:

1. Help children gain self confidence through the mastery of basic photographic skills and practice at verbal and visual communication.

2. Expose children to an environment that is conducive to sharing feelings, especially feelings often viewed as unacceptable in other settings.
3. Foster trusting, honest relationships among group participants; relationships that are conducive to risk-taking and personal growth.
4. Expose children to settings that provide productive feedback about how others see him/her and offer possible options for change.

A referral system was set up whereby teachers identified fifth and sixth graders having special needs around self-confidence, socialization, or unmet dependency needs. Teachers contacted parents to obtain their initial consent and to request their participation in an intake interview. Following a brief intake appointment, you workers made recommendations on the basis of their assessment of children's needs. Those children seen as being too distressed or lacking sufficient ego strength to benefit from the group experience were referred to more appropriate mental health facilities. Others were placed in self-expression groups consisting of 4 to 8 students and 1 or 2 leaders depending on the size of the group. Groups consisted of boys only or they were sexually mixed. Meetings were held once a week for 2 hours. Youth worker group leaders transported children by car from school to our facility and returned them to school following meetings.

The fact that group meetings took place outside of school but during school time had many benefits. First of all, some of the children referred had already accepted that they had "failed" in school. Changing the environment gave them new hope for success in a new venture. Secondly, many of the children resented school rules and didn't like being confined to one space all day. They appreciated being in an environment that was less formal and more relaxed. They liked being able to lounge in soft chairs or on the floor. They appreciated being able to leave the meeting room for bathroom stops with-our permission and they loved being able to have snacks during group meeting time or "school time". The most important benefit of meeting outside school was the amount of privacy it afforded us. Since much of our time was spent building trust and sharing important personal concerns, we needed a space that was private and separate from day-to-day comings and goings. The separate meeting room at the Youth Project helped the children define the group activity as special and different. In short, transporting the children to a new and separate environment meant they came to group more able to deal interpersonally and tackle the tasks of the day. Since the contact point was school, attendance and continuity were excellent.

At the first group meeting, we explained that our purpose for the group was to learn how to make photographs, to express our feelings with pictures and words, to explore people in relationship to ourselves, and to have fun. All group members

were given loose leaf books with empty pages. These books served as picture-journal rambling notebooks that helped provide a structure for our activities. Group members were asked to complete certain tasks at home or during group meetings that were placed in their notebooks. They were also encouraged to do any extra work in the books that they wanted, i.e. drawing, writing stories or poetry, pasteing snapshots or collages. These rambling journals were crucial to the fabric of the group. They not only provided a structure for group activities but more importantly, they became extremely meaningful to group members. The notebooks were a fluid record of the experiences and interactions that were occurring in group as well as a place to store all creative work completed during group. The notebooks became important personal accomplishments. One child, for instance, complained bitterly that his brother opened his drawer to read the book. This complaint led to a discussion of the issue of privacy at home and how it feels when someone invades your privacy.

Most group meetings consisted of three components: the first was a photography or written exercise, the second a discussion of our picture or written work, and the third was snack and play time. Exercises were designed to provide skill challenges for participants, initiate thought and feeling processes, and provide the substance for interaction and discussion. Ideas for exercises and media games came from "The Visual Game Book" by Ed Leplar, "Values Clarification" by Signey B. Simon, and

youth workers' imaginations. Written exercises included one in which individuals were asked to record five things they liked and five things they disliked about themselves or about school. Discussion around this exercise could be conducted in several ways: children could read their lists aloud and discuss their feelings or could be placed in pairs for discussion with their partners. Photographic exercises included one in which members took cameras home to photograph something or someone they loved. Pictures were shared with the group during group discussion. Sometimes photographic and written exercises were combined. For example, members were asked to act out one of their own positive attributes they had recorded earlier and partners photographed them. More specific examples of exercises and how they fostered group process will be presented in the discussion period to follow.

Snack and play time followed exercises and discussion. In addition to providing concrete reinforcement for members' participation, this portion of the group became an opportunity for leaders to observe group members' behavior and attempt to make helpful observations and interventions. Play choices were group decisions and activities ranged from board games such as monopoly to football and kickball.

During the course of the school year, the self-expression group format promoted the unfolding of a therapeutic process for children involved. Group leaders learned to respond to members' individual needs; while some children needed encouragement to

express themselves, others need help focusing, following through, or calming down. The exercises helped children to explore and focus on feelings in an environment that was safe and provided enough fun to keep group members excited and involved. In addition, the learning of photographic skills fostered the development of self-confidence among group members. Currently, we are planning to more formally assess improvement in self-expression group by incorporating pre- and post- measures of self-confidence and ego development.

Summary

In summary, I feel that these photography self-expression groups can be an important, useful developmental stimulus for children in the 11 to 14-year-age range. I feel exploring photography as a form of personal communication and coupled with creative writing in a functioning small group setting can be extremely beneficial to children. Many 11 to 14-year-olds don't have the attention spans or verbal skills to respond to standard interview-type therapy. This age child, however, often view puppets, clay and dolls as babyish. In a sense, camera, rambling journal and group discussion are to our groups what dolls, puppets, and clay are to a play therapy group. They are the tools we used to help children structure, focus and work through their feelings.

Addendum

Example:

Split the group into partners. Each child is instructed to take three polaroid pictures of his/her partner. The person being photographed is instructed to pose as someone they would like to be (e.g. ballerina or wrestler), or to present themselves to the camera in a way that shows a feeling or mood that they often have, i.e. happy, sad, tired. Group members are encouraged to use any available space to take these picture and to integrate the space into the purpose of the photograph. After all pictures are taken, we return to group meeting room. One at a time, children are asked to hold up a picture of themselves. The groups task is to guess what's going on in the photograph.

Group Member 1 holds up a picture of himself taking a boxer's stance. Group Member 2: "Your're Muhammad Ali." Group Member 1: "No." Group Member 3: "You're a boxer?" Group Member 1: "Well, sort of." "This is a picture of me as a fighter." Group Leader: "You like to fight?" Group Member 1: "No, I wish I could fight better but I don't really like to fight." Group Leader: "I don't understand. You don't like to fight, but you wish you could fight better. How come?" Group Member 1: "I don't like it when people pick on me." Group Leader: "Oh, I see, even though you don't like to fight, you wish you were tougher so people will leave you alone." Group

Member 1: "Yeah." Group Leader: "Do people pick on you a lot?" Group Member 1: "Sometimes, but not as much now as before." Group Leader: "Kids used to pick on you more before? What changed?" Group Member 1: "I fight back now; before I used to run or not hit back." Group Leader: "So this picture is a picture of how you would like to be?" Group Member 1: "Yeah." Group Leader: "What would you do if you were the toughest kid in school?" Group Member 1: "I wouldn't let anybody mess with me and I'd protect other kids from being bullied." Group Leader: "You know what it feels like to be bullied so you would like to protect everyone in school from that kind of pain. This is a picture of Group Member 1 as the toughest kid in school. A kid anyone can turn to for help and protection against bullies. Has anyone else had experiences like Group Member 1?"

Example

Take about 15 photographs by 5 distinctly different photographers. Display them in a way that allows them to be moved around and regrouped. Ask each child to pick 3 photos that he/she feels are done by the photographer. Try to get the children to focus on the mood, feeling or idea of the photograph. Group Leader: "Who is the man in the picture? What is his life like? Let's make up a story about him according to the way he looks and where he is. Is he happy or sad?" "How can you tell?" "Would you like to be in that space?" "Does it look like a comfortable place?" "Is it scary?" "What do you think the photographer thought of this place or person?" "Do you agree?" Each child has a turn to pick which photos were done by the same photographer and explain why. Group members are encouraged to agree or not and tell why. This type of comparison game is a good way to get children to understand or respond to photographs, but it can also lead to some amazing discussion: Group Member 1: "These 3 photos were done by the same photographer. Nothing is clear, the rooms are very messy and dirty and I don't know what those blurry things are in the corner." Group Leader: "If we could magically project you into that space, how do you think you would feel?" Group Member 1: "Scared, very creepy; I'd want to leave." Group Member 2: "It looks like something bad is about to happen there."

"I'm not sure what, but....." Group Member 3: "It looks like death, maybe it's what happends after you die." Group Member 1: "My friend died last year." Group Leader: "How did it happen?" Group Member 1: "He was swimming alone and we went out too far and got pulled under. He was my next door neighbor." Group Leader: "I can see by the look on your face that it makes you sad to think about him." Group Member 1 nods. Group Leader: "Do you think of him often?" Group Member 1: "Sometimes, but not as much as I used to." Group Leader: "Did you cry when you found out?" Group Member 1: "No, but I was very sad and I didn't want to go to school, so my mother let me take the week off 'cause I didn't want to go and I was very upset." "My grandfather died when I was a little boy." "He was a very nice man, but I didn't know him very well 'cause I was very young." "I remember my mother was very sad and she didn't want to go out of the house." Group Leader: "When I hear you talk about these things, it makes me feel sad, too." "I can tell you've had some painful losses in your life." "It must hurt you very much to have lost a friend." "Has anyone else had a similar loss or very sad experience that they care to share?, etc."

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Allowing Work to be Shown.

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